Perfectly Frank

Frank Loesser grew up like a Runyon character in reverse. Instead of being a tough guy who aspires to be sophisticated, Loesser was a sophisticate who aspired to be a tough guy. As a result, he was a lifelong disappointment to his cultured, intellectual family.

Born in 1910 in New York City, young Frank grew up in the shadow of his older brother Arthur, a classical piano prodigy who became the head of the piano department at the Cleveland Institute of Music and the music critic for the Cleveland Press. The younger boy rebelled by trying “to come off like a street mug,” said producer Cy Feuer. “For spite, Frank lived out of the side of his mouth.”

But the self-described “evil of two Loessers” burst with natural talent, teaching himself to play piano by ear, draw caricatures and even build furniture. The only thing he couldn’t seem to do was learn to drive, which proved a challenge when he moved to Hollywood at the age of 26. There, he penned the lyrics to a number of songs noted for their straightforward vernacular language, including “Two Sleepy People,” “Heart and Soul” and “See What the Boys in the Backroom Will Have,” made famous by Marlene Dietrich in the Western Destry Rides Again.

While serving in the Air Force during World War II, he published his first song as both composer and lyricist, a patriotic novelty number with the colloquial title of “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” His next big hit won him the Oscar for Best Song in 1949, forming the template for a hallmark of Loesser’s style: the conversational, contrapuntal duet. “Baby, It’s Cold Outside” has a series of overlapping lines; it is as much as scene as a song. It’s a technique that Loesser uses to great effect in Guys and Dolls, beginning with the opening song, “Fugue for Tinhorns.”

The “Fugue” isn’t actually a fugue by the strict classical music definition, but more of a round, like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” However, it is the first time that musical technique was used in a major Broadway musical. Since Loesser wrote a song about horse racing before he knew the show would be about a craps game, the creators struggled to find an organic place for “Fugue” in the story until producer Ernie Martin realized it could go at the front before the audience knew what the show was about.

According to Feuer, “No one has ever questioned this fundamental logical consistency.”

Loesser also uses counterpoint in the show’s climax, “Marry the Man Today,” as a way of uniting the story’s two disparate heroines. Dramatically, the song satisfies the promise of the title; the story begins with the “guys” asserting their identities as gamblers and ends with the “dolls” resolving to change them.

Working around actors’ limitations
It’s a testament to the skill of the show’s creators that so many crucial decisions were made based on the limitations of its original cast. The classical soprano voice of Isabel Bigley, who created the role of Sarah, suited the ballads “I’ll Know” and “I’ve Never Been in Love Before,” but she couldn’t loosen up and swing “If I Were a Bell.” Loesser—who was so dogmatic about how he wanted his songs sung he invented the term “Loesserando” to put on sheet music—stood on a riser so he was nose-to-nose with the tall actress to coach her note by note. When she failed to do as he pleased, he hauled off and slapped her in the face.

Predictably, that didn’t get the desired result, and the number temporarily was reassigned to Miss Adelaide, for whom the lyric “little me, with my quiet upbringing” made no sense. Feuer claims credit for the solution: having Sarah sing the number drunk. It worked, and Bigley won a Tony, along with the show and its score.
The creators had no such problems with the role of Adelaide, whose number “A Bushel and a Peck,” contrasting the double meaning of a peck as an agricultural unit of measure and a term of kiss, became the unlikely pop hit of the show. Moreover, “Adelaide’s Lament” was recognized as an instant classic, a character-driven comic soliloquy that set a musical theatre standard seldom matched. Composing music for Nathan Detroit proved a bigger challenge. The creative team was so enamored of character actor Sam Levene’s acting they were willing to accommodate his inability to match pitch. So the character’s original four songs were reduced to one duet with Adelaide, “Sue Me.” Even there, Levene had so much trouble finding his note that Loesser wrote the five-note phrase “Call the lawyer and . . .” to give the actor a running start. The unintended consequence of a character who never expresses emotion through song finally tentatively creeping up to a declaration of love is, as Feuer puts it, “ridiculously moving.”

That dichotomy captures both the paradox and the appeal of Runyon’s characters. While Runyon cast a satiric eye on his subjects, the heart of his stories contains a fundamentally American optimism, a belief in redemption and second chances. Beneath the sass and sizzle of Guys and Dolls, beats that same heart.

Nowhere is that better expressed than in Loesser’s favorite musical moment in the show. It comes when Sky and Sarah have arrived back in New York just before dawn and reveals the feelings of Loesser himself, who rose every morning at 4:00 a.m. to write (and pace and smoke and doodle) and work at what he called “the romance business.”

My time of day is the dark time,
A couple of deals before dawn
When the street belongs to the cop
And the janitor with the mop
And the grocery clerks are all gone

When the smell of the rain-washed pavement
Comes up clean, and fresh, and cold
And the street lamp light
Fills the gutter with gold

That’s my time of day, my time of day.
And you’re the only doll I’ve ever wanted to share it with me.

Perhaps the greatest love story in Guys and Dolls is the one the creators had with the city they loved most.—Marc Acito

An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2015 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, click here. Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring a school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.